

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***

For the week of December 8, 1997

This week, a conversation with Neil Randall, a columnist for browserwars.com where he is the resident advocate of the Microsoft Internet Explorer web browser. Is Netscape or Internet Explorer the better browser? Which should you use? Do the "browser wars" really mean anything?

=*=*= NETSCAPE VS. INTERNET EXPLORER -- DOES IT MATTER? =*=*=

KMS: Hi Neil. Every week you and I have a vitriolic "head to head" argument about web browsers, which are featured at www.browserwars.com. Between all the name-calling, you extol the virtues of Microsoft Internet Explorer and I'm the advocate of Netscape Communicator. The discussions are interesting, but in all honesty I'm not a die-hard devotee of Netscape. I mean, it's a great browser, but Internet Explorer has some fine points too. So I ask you: do you really think one browser is significantly better than the other? Would the average Net surfer have a less wholesome experience if she used Netscape rather than IE?

NFR: The only time she'd have a truly different experience at all would be when a Web site featured something that one browser could do that the other couldn't. Technically, this means ActiveX controls, some JavaScripts, and Dynamic HTML. Internet Explorer can't display the Netscape home page properly, for example, because the page uses Netscape's proprietary HTML feature called Layers, which IE can't handle. On the other hand, the Microsoft pages look better in IE than in Communicator because they use Microsoft's version of Dynamic HTML. And some pages use Microsoft-specific ActiveX controls instead of Java applets for multimedia. Those are the problems.

But when it comes to clicking on hyperlinks, storing bookmarks, viewing colorful pages, and all the other things that make up the vast majority of Web access, I don't think there's much difference between the two browsers. Some people say that Netscape is less stable, others that IE is less stable. Some say that Netscape is faster, others that IE is faster. (Of course, what faster actually means on the Net is unclear). I use both of them about equally, to be honest. And I like both of them, too.

KMS: I'm tempted to say that the so-called browser wars between Netscape and Microsoft are just a big waste of marketing might, like the cola wars, but that's too simple. The browser wars have forced both companies to make their programs the best they can be. They've added features and improved the programs' stability. Now that they're in this battle, I don't think either company will be willing to call it off, even though the browsers are, arguably, just fine now. They're just going to keep piling on features forever.

We users are the winners and the losers. On one hand, we have access to more powerful Internet clients. On the other hand, as you pointed out, the two browsers are never quite compatible, so we have to put up with "Netscape-enhanced" sites and "This page is best viewed with IE" pages. How long can this continue?

NFR: I don't know how long it can last, because I don't think we have a real precedent for this. We've had incompatible file formats for different programs in the past, and we've had incompatible technologies like VCR's famous Betamax versus

VHS, but in all such cases I can think of, you had to pay money to get one format or the other. You can download Navigator and IE for nothing (Netscape is apparently even thinking of getting rid of the licensing requirement for Navigator), so it's not the same. But I agree with you: I don't think we'd want to switch televisions to watch a new program, and I don't think the "best viewed with" idea is long for this world.

You're exactly right that the browser wars have forced both companies to work hard and fast towards perfecting their programs. In fact, this might be the only high-profile application battle remaining. Much to my disappointment, Microsoft has locked up the office suite market for both Macs and PCs, and there's very little new happening with word processors or spreadsheets as a result. Right now, Netscape and Microsoft are both intent on releasing the best browser suite, and we're the winners: whatever their motivations, they're both great packages.

But I'd like to say one thing to your readers, Kevin. It's this: Use both browsers, not just one, and especially not just IE. PC owners probably have IE pre-installed, or ready to install. That's Microsoft's plan. But we owe it to ourselves to download and work with Netscape Communicator, or at least Navigator, as well. If we don't, there's a chance Microsoft really will take the whole thing over (giving away software can make that happen), and then the browser wars will stop. If that happens, we can say good-bye to innovations.

KMS: I don't know about that. I think -- well, I hope -- that there will always be innovators on the Net. After all, there are choices of other web browsers for those who want to be conscientious objectors to the browser wars, have had it with the quirks of Netscape and IE, or just want to try something different. For instance, "Opera" is a very well-regarded alternative to the big two browsers. And lest we forget, the grandfather of all browsers, NCSA Mosaic, is still available.

(More conversations between Neil -- who is usually quite cantankerous -- and me can be found at <http://www.browserwars.com>.)

=*=*= SOFTWARE MENTIONED IN THIS ISSUE +*++

Microsoft Internet Explorer: <http://www.microsoft.com/ie/download/> (Windows and Mac)

NCSA Mosaic: <http://www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/Software/mosaic-w/> (Windows version)
<http://www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/Software/mosaic-m/> (Mac version)

Netscape Communicator: <http://www.netscape.com/download/> (Windows and Mac)

Opera: <http://www.operasoftware.com> (Windows)

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Got comments or ideas for future newsletter issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com.

When you're dancing her dance you don't stand a chance. Her grip of romance makes you fall. So you think, might as well dance a tango to hell. At least I'll be...copyright 1997 by Kevin Savetz.